The Fourth Church Pulpit

CHURCH MATTERS

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John M. Buchanan

I have no higher vision of the church than as the Servant of the World, not withdrawn but participating, not embattled but battling, not condemning but healing the wounds of the hurt and the lost and the lonely, not preoccupied with its survival or its observances or its Articles, but with the needs of humankind .... The greatest danger to Christianity ... is pseudo-Christianity. And the marks of pseudo-Christianity are easy to recognize; it always prefers stability to change: it always prefers order to freedom: it always prefers law to justice: and it always prefers what it calls realism to love.

Alan Paton
Instrument of Thy Peace and *Christianity and Crisis*

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut Chicago, Ill. 60611
Phone: (312) 787-4570
John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Scripture
Matthew 9:35-10:8
1 Corinthians 1:1-8

"To the church of God ...
called to be saints, ..."
1 Corinthians 1:2 (NRSV)

Robert Frost used to say that he had a lover's quarrel with the world. I have a lover's quarrel with the church and I am not alone. Few topics, at least in the world of religion, occupy such a major amount of attention or generate such a monumental amount of heat, not to mention printers ink. In my own modest library books about the church occupy two full shelves.

In preparing for this sermon I walked over to the shelves and scanned the titles — which indicate the passion of this lover's quarrel, as well as its general tenor.

The Comfortable Pew
God's Frozen People
The Noise of Solemn Assemblies
Rocking the Ark
The Grass Roots Church
Who's Killing the Church
The Church Confident
The Trivialization of the Church
Resident Aliens

And my favorite title:

The Great Apostolic Blunder Machine

All of these books announce that the church is in trouble, probably dying.

Each of them has a point of view and a prescription to correct what is wrong. Each allows for hope. Each is an expression, of sorts, of a lover's quarrel. We can't seem to stand the church, and we can't figure out how to live without it.

I have a confession to make. I have added to the confusion. I have written a book, *Being Church, Becoming Community*. Its prescription is that if everybody did it like we do it here at Fourth Presbyterian Church, everything would be fine.

The fact is that Christian men and women have had a lover's quarrel with the church from the very beginning. The first to express himself on the topic was the man who, more than anyone else in history, is responsible for the very existence of the Church, St. Paul. You might say that he invented church — it's all his fault. His birth name is Saul. He was a tentmaker by profession and in his spare time became a lawyer, a Pharisee — trained and practiced in the law of Judaism. He was a Jew, a Roman citizen — a man of brilliant intellect with a sharp tongue but a heart full of love. He first emerges in our story as a persecutor of the earliest Christians. But one day, on his way to Damascus to cause trouble for the Christians, God knocks him off his horse, shows him the truth and Saul of Tarsus becomes a passionate follower of Jesus, and, in Jesus' name, sometimes almost in spite of himself, a passionate lover of his new brothers and sisters. And then Paul — he has taken on a new name now — starts to promote as passionately as he persecuted. He tells everybody he can about the mystery and miracle of God's love in Jesus Christ, how it turned him

around, recreated him, put new life and love in his heart. The word he uses for it is grace and Paul can never quite get over the mystery of it; that God should love him now and forever, not because he had done anything to deserve it but because it was and is the nature of God to love. It was almost more than he could stand and the power of it inspired the tentmaker to write as sublimely and beautifully as anyone ever has:

> "I am persuaded that neither life nor death, nor anything else in all creation will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord."

Wherever he went (and before he was done he went about everywhere it was humanly possible to go in the ancient world) Paul told the story, and lo and behold people believed him and those people came together, started to talk together about what it meant to believe in Jesus, started to practice their religion in light of their belief in what God had done in Jesus, started to depend on one another when their neighbors suspected they were up to something dangerous or subversive. Paul didn't even have a name for them yet. No one had coined the term "Christian" yet. Sometimes he called them "believers," sometimes "saints," sometimes "people of the way." And occasionally he used a unique Greek word — *ekklesia* — the "ones called out." God's called out people. That's the first term ever used for the "church."

Paul didn't know what to make of it, whatever one wanted to call it. He loved individual believers, but every time individual believers gathered they had a knack for forgetting why they were together, or arguing about this or that, choosing sides and fighting, almost making a mockery of the mystery and miracle of grace that had called them together.

Paul's was the first "lover's quarrel" with the church. And no church, with the possible exception of the saints in Galatia, irritated him as much as the folk in Corinth. Nor did he know and love any believers more.

His letter — in which he means to call them to account, scold them for their incessant arguments — begins almost like a love letter:

> "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints ... Grace ... and peace ... I give thanks to my God always for you ..."
> (1 Corinthians 1:2-4)

The church is what happens when people believe that Jesus Christ is the revelation, the embodiment, the incarnation of God's love. And it survives, and always in some way will, I believe, because the church is what God means. It is what God intends. It is, someone said, the way God has chosen to say, "I am here in the world with my grace."

And so, in spite of my own private lover's quarrel, I have invested my adult life in the church because I believe deeply and profoundly that the church matters.

Cynthia Campbell, President of McCormick Theological Seminary, told me about participating in an ordination in an African-American Church on the south side last week. She noted that the church had produced eight ministers in the last ten years. After the service she talked to an elderly woman, complimented her. "Well, that's just the ministers," she said. "Every child, young person, who grows up here we send to college. We support, pray, write letters, give money and send cookies."

In an editorial last week Clarence Page commented on the burning of Black churches. "Black America's most important institution" is the way he described it. Page wrote:

> "Even in the gloomiest days of slavery ... the Black church was something ... often the only thing ... Black people were allowed to call their own. They used the church to lift up their spirits, strengthen their families, enrich their culture and organize their politics. Every major movement African-Americans have known, from the abolitionist movement to the Black

> political empowerment movement is rooted in the Black church ... With that in mind the seeming irrationality of firebombing Black churches suddenly takes on an eerie and cruel rationality."

The church matters.

Stanley Hauerwas teaches at Duke Divinity School and writes a lot about the church. Hauerwas has his lover's quarrel and I took the first words of his recent book, *Good Company*, as the title for this sermon, "Church Matters."

I found myself smiling at this paragraph from the introduction:

> "I am not unaware of the highly compromised nature of the church. I am, after all, a Methodist. I have seen the worst, since I attended the annual conference ... The religious and theological vacuity is stifling. How a people who worship a crucified God could become so uninteresting is, as religious people like to say, a mystery." (p. 4)

Because the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is about to gather for its annual event, the 208th General Assembly, and I am one of the 568 commissioners and a candidate for the office of Moderator of the Assembly, I am getting a fair amount of mail every day. And because it is the nature of this kind of correspondence, most of it is unhappy: complaining, arguing, threatening to quit, condemning. I almost cringe when I open my mail these days. Last week, however, I received a good and encouraging letter from a friend. His letter contained a story he thought I might appreciate.

It is about a boy whose mother woke him one Sunday for church. He told her he didn't want to go. "I'm not going this morning," he said. "I'm not going, any more." "Why?" his mother asked. He told her, "Because no one down at church likes me and it is boring. Give me two reasons why I should go to church." She responded, "Because you are 52 years old and you are the minister." (Thanks to The Reverend Thomas D. York for the story.)

It has been an anomaly from the beginning. Not just the theologians, historians and ecclesiastics, but even the best writers of our civilization have written about church, argued with, critiqued it, hoped and wished and aspired for it and still do: John Updike, Toni Morrison, Annie Dillard, Kathleen Norris, C. S. Lewis, T. S. Eliot, Reynolds Price — all have something to say about the church, usually critical but also hopeful. And you, I expect, you too know the enigma, the anomaly, the sometimes tragedy of the church, but also its glory, its hope, its occasional faithfulness and its promise.

I've spent most of every waking moment since 1960 working in it, fussing about it, arguing with it, hoping for it and wanting it to be more faithful, more courageous, more generous, more loving, more accepting and, I confess, loving it. And I want briefly and simply to tell you a few of the reasons why, in order, finally, to commend it to you, your quarrel, but also your love.

I could spend a lot of time telling stories because to live with this institution is to see every single day why it matters. Last Tuesday, for instance, clergy and members of a few churches gathered on a vacant lot at the corner of 18th and South Wabash to break ground for a 170-unit single-room-occupancy facility to serve the city's homeless. I could tell you a Tutoring story, a Center for Whole Life story, a Center for Older Adults, Social Service Center, Counseling Center, or Children's Center anecdote. But I won't, except to say that here and throughout the world the work of caring, serving, healing, feeding, clothing, sheltering, teaching, nurturing goes on primarily because the church of Jesus Christ exists. Nobody else is even a close second.

But instead of anecdotes I'd like to tell you why the church, when it is at its best, speaks words of truth that contain within them the hope of the world.

The first is a word of humility, modesty. The church is the only organization in the world that constitutes itself on the basis of an acknowledgement of inadequacy, a confession of sin. One could argue that most of what is wrong with the human race and most of what has gone wrong in human history started when someone began to think too highly of himself or herself. Wars, racism, holocausts, the despoiling of the environment, oppression, all of it, from Hitler's Thousand Year Reich to the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, to the burning of a Black church in Enid, Oklahoma, is connected to the universal human tendency to think too highly of itself, to set itself above its neighbor, its environment, or another clan, tribe, race, nation. It is the church that insists that the most appropriate initial words to say as we gather weekly are words of confession.

And it is the church that holds human sin in tension with an equally important truth, an incredibly important truth, namely that every human being is a special and unique creation of God, blessed by God, endowed with God's image, deserving of the respect of others, deserving of equal access to the bounty of creation. And further that each is called by God, given gifts with which to contribute to the ongoing project of creation. It is the church that insists that human beings remember, in addition to their shortcomings, their glory, their exalted status, their potential and high hope.

And it is the church that at its best reminds the world that the greatest reality of all is love, that the fullest and happiest life to which any of us can ever aspire is to find someone, something to love and then to give our lives away. I believe the church, alone, when it is at its best shows the world what love means, by living — not for itself, its survival, its growth and enhancement — but for others; shows the world something of what it means to be fully alive by being willing to give life away.

It is the church at its best which points to and shows the meaning of and kneels before, what I believe, is ultimate truth; ultimate truth about reality, about the world, about myself, about what lies ahead — namely a cross and a man laying down his life for others, a man dying to show us how to live; the man whose name this organization takes — carefully, mostly undeservedly, occasionally faithfully, faithfully frequently enough to keep both my quarreling and my love going.

The Christian Church. The Church of Jesus Christ. Amen.